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ART AND DEMOCRACY*

We are all familiar with the sneers of painters at the fondness of the American people for a certain picture which has been hawked about at innumerable exhibitions and reproduced in a thousand colored lithographs, and which consists merely in an exact delineation of an old violin hanging on a barn door. As a bit of illusion it is nearly perfect, so nearly so as to remind one of the Greek tale about the painted grapes which birds pecked at.

Now, what I want to do is to reason with my artistic friends, whether of the craft or the laity, upon the inferences drawn from that popular fondness for the evidence of skill in imitation. I doubt whether they have stood, as I have, among a crowd of people admiring that violin, and slyly questioned them, drawn them out, satisfied myself just what it was they admired in the picture and why. So far as I have observed, the artistic folk have turned contemptuous from the crowd and left them to their illusion.

The impression appears to be that the crowd admires the violin because of its realism. But such is not the case. Talk to them sympathetically, put aside the temper of condescension, and you will find that their praise of the realism is incidental to something else, and that this other consideration is the real source of their delight. It is not the thing imitated but the power to carry the imitation through and achieve success in it that wins their applause. We may go still further in this dignification of an interest which at first blush appears so crude. These people have a keen sense of the faculty of imitation and of the conditions in their own lives under which they can apply it; in the picture, their shrewd common sense recognizes that this faculty has been raised to a higher power than they can raise it to, and has been applied under conditions which to them are strange, which to them offer difficulties insurmountable; the

*An address delivered before the Sewanee Conference on Southern Problems, July, 1910.

mainspring of their delight is in this recognition of the victory of the imitator over his obstacles, the triumph of his technique over his medium—to use a terminology which, fortunately, they let alone—and thus, in spite of their sophisticated condemners, their delight is æsthetic and imaginative.

Is not just such an attitude on a more sophisticated plane the very thing demanded by the artists themselves? It ought to be and it is. Though the lesser values of art—its power in the simple forms to re-vitalize our memories of things and thus carry forward the eternal warfare of the spirit of man against oblivion ; its power, in the more significant forms, to enrich our sense of things by setting objects in the light of a peculiar point of view and thus enlarging our souls—though these lesser values are very precious, the unique value is in its power to create experience. The lesser values may be found in other things than art. I have a bit of marble picked up one extraordinarily beautiful day among Greek ruins. I doubt whether any picture could re-vitalize my memory and recover that scene as does the sight of this bit of stone picked up by my own hand. The case against exclusive realism in art is not that the warfare to defeat oblivion is not worth while, but that art is not the only means to carry it on, and there are other things which art can do better, things which nothing but art can do at all. So of the enlargement of our horizon by the setting of objects in new lights : though this is more fully an artistic achievement than is the recall of past impressions, even this is not solely within artistic jurisdiction. I grant I have learned to see certain phases of life in brilliantly particular ways entirely because of long devotion to Thackeray ; but I have had a similar experience, as a result of sheer argument, driven into me by the purely philosophic bias of certain others. To call the philosophers and Thackeray by the same term is to enlarge it so recklessly as to destroy its definition, to make it include the world. And thus one is forced to the conclusion that the artists and the plain people delighted over the skill of the imitator have the right idea. The unique value of art—what gives it a function of its own, and a place it has a right to demand—is its power to enable us to pass out of ourselves, to identify ourselves with another, to

experience in imagination the thrill of that other vanquishing his obstacles.

The fact that what is here insisted on is a truism, ought itself to be a truism. Instead of being considered, as it generally is, an esoteric notion fit only for the elect, it should be taken for granted as the one undeniable right of art to exist. There are the plain people, delighted with the triumph of the imitator, to prove it; there is the time-old saying, "More in the telling than the tale;" still more convincingly, there is the universal interest of the world in biography. Reflect a moment upon the nature of that interest. What in the general mind distinguishes a good biography from a poor one? It is not, we must confess, scientific accuracy. It is not, certainly, the conviction that one's impression of the subject becomes larger, more significant, than when one began to read. It may involve both these considerations, but what it must have is the sense that the book has delivered one momentarily from the prison of one's own experience, has worked a magical translation by virtue of which, for that resplendent moment, one has attained experience impossible to one's ordinary life. Anybody, thinks the plain man, can heap up statistics, can tell us how many men were in the Austrian army at Lodi, how many in the French, how long was the dreadful bridge, how many cannon swept it. But who, as he leads us through the stages of the narrative, can so identify us with young Buonaparte as to make our minds merge gradually into his, make us conscious of all the processes of his thought; so incorporate us in the intensities of his feelings, that, as the crisis approaches, we are so at one with him as to have made his battle our battle, his plans our plans, and when, at last, in the midst of that storm of cannon-shot, an indomitable figure gleams heroic at the head of the column, it is oneself—one's very self—that leads triumphant France upon the Austrian guns. It is still a greater feat of imagination—and for some a still more thrilling experience—to be one with Shakespeare shaping Macbeth. When I say "one with Shakespeare," I am, of course, indulging the temptation to use grandiloquent language. But the same is true of being one with Napoleon. In each case, a full identification with the workman at his work—

the n^{th} degree of what those plain people feel for the simple imitator—is a dream, a “hope too high,” as Kipling would say, first cousin to the crying of a child for the moon. Just the same, it is the final goal of all our desires in the enjoyment of art.

Well, then, if both the artists and the plain people have the same idea, and if it is the right idea, why do they mutually distrust and suspect each other? That they do, cannot, I fear, be denied. To the average American artist, the plain man appears an economic tyrant, who limits the artistic activity by refusing to pay for good work. To the average of the men in the street, the artist—when they think of him at all, which is seldom—appears a fanciful creature, a sort of unpractical confidence man, seeking to inveigle them into buying what they do not want. Plainly, there is an overlooked middle term to this discussion forgotten by both sides. Upon the detection of it, and the acceptance of whatever it reveals, hangs the whole case for art in a democracy. For artists are as human as other people—generally much more so—and if relegated to an obscure corner of the social system they will fret their hearts out and disappear. It is not that they are especially selfish, but that they are filled with impulses which must find expression, which if pent up produce nervous wreck. So, talk as we may, all this grand matter of art has a strictly economic base. The fine artist may not perhaps demand a great price for his work; but he will surely demand a chance to keep alive and do his work. And who is to support him? Thus the problem becomes a matter of the structure of society. In a democratic community, when the multitude settles the bill for keeping the artist alive, what are the conditions under which it will consent to pay the price?

What is needed is a non-partisan definition of artistic enjoyment. And here the sophisticated people, because better educated than the crowd, have less excuse for the crying illogicality which they so often display. In harping as they do—and ought to do—upon the need of technical understanding, if one is to enjoy art, they are asserting in substance that what gives it significance is the use made by it of mental activities which the observer

shares with the artist in at least a respectable degree. And this is common sense. How are we to enter into Napoleon's achievement as pure workman if we disdain to study the art of war? How with Shakespeare, Titian, Wagner? Let us accept this as the basis of definition; a mental activity in common is the only rational link between artist and observer. The happiness of the artist is indisputably the sense of power developed in his distinctive use of this activity. How then can we ignore the idea that the genuinely artistic pleasure of the observer is also in the sense of how this activity is being used? But if the use of this common factor by the artist tend only to vivify past impressions, his service to the observer is so doubtful that it is almost negligible. What is certain to delight the observer is the recognition in the work of the artist of a higher power of the common factor than he can find elsewhere. And now we may define artistic enjoyment. It is the effect of so dealing with one's experience as to compel it to yield up, in imagination, reactions upon oneself which the original experience, unaided, cannot produce.

A single illustration will help make this definition clear. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in northern France, there lived a people in whom the stormy genius of the North splendidly flowered. They were the children of the shadowy, changeful, side of our multiform Mother Earth. They were also intensely sensitive to impressions. We need nothing but the confession of their art to know that those dreamers of the Middle Ages had looked upon the flight of the clouds across a March sky, upon the swift alternations of sunshine and shadow across their glimmering world "in the uncertain glory of an April day," upon the inconstant vehemence of the northern tempest, and had felt these experiences as one feels the presence of a friend. Their natures became attuned to a fine sense of the beauty of change. We may coin a term and say that there was an "experience-rhythm" making music through their everyday lives and that this rhythm, at bottom, was a sense of their own delighted response to the brilliant changefulness of the northern world. The men who devised Gothic architecture had stood on hilltops and seen a vast illimitableness of shade, gray and blue and

violet, change in the twinkle of an eye to radiant intricacies of golden light; they had thrilled to that transformation; the joy of it, the desire to experience it again, and yet again, had possessed their souls, had become a recurrent rhythm dear to them as their personal attachments. When those men undertook to devise an architecture that should constantly delight them, this experience-rhythm which was vitally part of their everyday asserted itself with authority. Hence, the only changeful architecture that Europe has produced. The Gothic church, with its intricate pattern of shadows cast all over it by spire and pinnacle and flying buttress, constantly shifting in obedience to the sun, is not the same thing two hours in succession. Contrast it with the temple of that other European race that has also devised supremely original architecture, contrast the variability of the aspect of the northern structure with the calm fidelity of its own first impression, the serene immutability of the Greek. How unquestionable the fact of the utter difference of the experience-rhythms on which the two races built! How unlikely that either, in its period of creation, when absorbed in translating its own experience-rhythms into rhythms of expression, could have appreciated the other. But in each case what a typical instance of so dealing with one's experience as to compel it to mean more to one in imagination than it means in fact. That sense of change which delighted the mediæval Frenchman as he watched a storm from the walls of Chartres, that experience-rhythm which he had felt so often before and was feeling again with a renewed consciousness of how much he loved it, that same rhythm, miraculously translated into a form of experience not to be had from nature, became a new delight for him, looking upward from the plain below to the miracle of spires crowning the hill while the pattern of its shadows shifted and wavered all over its surface, as if veritably a stone dragon were there, breathing in its sleep.

This idea that our artistic enjoyment is chiefly the finding of our own experience-rhythms gloriously transformed, changed "into something rich and strange," might easily involve us in a subtlety which in certain other connections is fruitful, even vital, but is here beside the mark; namely, the old contention

as to the relative importance of matter and method, of subject and treatment. Does this doctrine of the translated rhythms as the middle term between artist and observer hold good everywhere through all the ramifications of their inspiring fellowship? Did that mediæval Frenchman, who was so fortunate as to live in Chartres, did he, thinking of the cathedral as the victory of an architect over his obstacles, heighten his capacity to think and feel by means of the same mental process through which the cathedral was revealed to him as the magical transfiguration of his own sense of the surrounding world? Certainly. The doctrine is universal. Without it, the power over a devotee of any intellectual activity is an enigma. Only through my understanding of the doctrine, can I, who have little mathematics, perceive there is no affectation in the saying of Professor Royce that he knows of "no subject more *cog* than the differential calculus." His experience-rhythms, his habitual fashion of conceiving life, enable him to rise to such a dizzying familiarity with the abstract. So a young painter of my acquaintance, flushed from the first victories of his technique can make a case for his dangerously rash remark—rash, because he is quite convinced he appreciates Titian—"No one can appreciate a picture who couldn't have painted it." Finally, in the moral world, which after all is the norm of all the worlds, who appreciates goodness until he has begun to be somewhat good himself? It is because of such poor virtue as I possess—or you, or any man—and of the stirring in us of the desire to be nobler than we now are, that the spectacle of resplendent virtue, of the life of St. Francis, or John Wesley, or Florence Nightingale, thrills us so magnificently, gives to us fresh charges of moral power. Exactly corresponding relations must get established before we can be charged anew by art or by mathematics. To urge upon the plain man a belief in the good that art may do him, and yet to forget to expound this doctrine, is about as futile as to assure him he should wrestle daily with the angel of the calculus.

We have now the key to all the popular enjoyment of art that ever was. We have also, if we will look closely, found the cause of the confusion on this subject in America. Popular art is not all. Those experience-rhythms, which come so near to

giving us the secret of all phases of the life of imagination, may be apprehended in other ways than by direct birth out of everyday conditions. It is possible for exceptional persons who have command of time and money to render themselves, by dint of much intellectual culture, susceptible to foreign art, even though the experience-rhythms of it have no place in their own lives. These are the virtuosos and the whole clan of their imitators. Fortunate people! But they are essential aristocrats and their type promises no solution for any democratic problem. What vitiates so much of the writing on democracy is the assumption of a virtuoso type—or a dilution of that type—as the basis of the state. Would that we had a right to assume this, but experience shows we have not.

Most of us who talk art in America, it must be confessed, are of the virtuoso type—or dilutions of that type. We have the virtuoso's curiosity, his academic point of view. We love to explore daintily, to pick our way through strange interests. In a word, we are survivals of another phase of society and are not yet fully democratized. But this is not the worst. We are also poor. We cannot afford to gratify the virtuoso tastes. And now comes the serious part. Without realizing what we were doing, we have made our art-talk mainly a special plea for inveigling the multitude into paying for our virtuosity. We pretend to be considering their interests, but we deceive ourselves. We ask them to pay for a sort of art in which the experience-rhythms do not come out of their own lives, and hence are powerless to effect them; and when they turn a deaf ear, we generally lose our tempers and call them vulgar. No wonder they retaliate by calling us confidence men.

Well, what are we to do about it? What is our conclusion as to the place of art in the life of the multitude?

For my own part, once I have looked fact in the face, the rest is plain. I turn back from that communion with the verities somewhat humbled, it is true, and with a chastened sense of my own motives, but though a sadder, undoubtedly a wiser man. Here is my main conclusion: there must be an end to virtuosity, and the argument for virtuosity, other than as the luxurious individualism of the exceptional person—exceptional

either in wealth, or education, or talent. We must accept as our clew to the matter—whatever our virtuosity may protest—that American crowd delighted by the spectacle of a high power of the faculty of imitation. We must formulate our new position by confessing that art, if it is to be more than an idle pastime, like bridge or poker, has no choice but to give to people a larger activity than they can have without it, and therefore we may dogmatize thus: to enlarge oneself by means of a work of art, one must be able to find in it one's own mental processes operating on a larger scale, to a more significant result, than they do in oneself.

Now, what, on this understanding, can we do for the cause of Art in America? Personally, in our own brave dream, we may continue virtuosos to the end of the chapter. If we wish, Mr. Morgan, paying half a million for a single picture, may shine before the inward eye, in the "bliss of solitude," as our personal ideal; but as citizens of a democracy, honestly desiring to be practical with our fellows, what course should we pursue?

The answer is plain. If we truly love our countrymen, we—that small band of the artistic propaganda—must consider less what does good to ourselves and more carefully consider what may benefit the mass; if we truly love art, and desire its increase in the world—not merely our own luxuriating in an artistic egoism—we must set ourselves to solve the question: what phase of artistic life, under these special conditions, is a practical matter? Having rung true—as, of course, all of us will on these great moral issues, we will proceed to set ourselves aside, leave the virtuoso in us at home in his dream, and go forth to do battle with no mean antagonists.

And now for our programme. Away with all high talk about the great coming artist who shall interpret American life. Away with nine tenths, at least, of the conscious attempt to make artists. We must take our cue from this basal matter of the experience-rhythms. There is no art in America, not because we lack artists, nor because we lack the life that might serve their needs, but because of our lack of a definite sense of that life. We lack in ourselves distinctive experience-rhythms. American life, the American scene, instead of lacking material

for the artist, is, if anything, too welteringly full of it. The trouble is that the American has not yet acquired a definite reaction to it, does not yet know what he deeply likes, what he truly, faithfully, does not like.

This is the heart of the matter. So far as I see, there is but one service the lovers of art can do the cause of art to-day in America. They must boldly invade that crowd gazing with admiration and delight at the miracle of imitation contained in the painted violin, and engage them in a fight to a finish, not on æsthetic issues so-called—not on art, in the narrow sense, at all; not on realism, nor impressionism, nor how to look at a picture, nor how to listen to music, nor how to read poetry—but on this deeper issue of their rhythms of experience. The painter folk are right after all about that crowd being terribly depressing. But they are gravely wrong in not analyzing more subtly than they do the source of error, in not drawing finer distinctions, in not attempting reason with the delicacy of their own technique. Here, we of the propaganda, in our humble way, must improve upon our masters.

It is incumbent on us to arouse in the plain men mental activities more stimulating than the faculty of imitation. It is our duty to organize his response to the dizzying variability of American life; to teach him to keep his head in the midst of its whirling, to acquire in as full a degree as he now has the faculty of imitation, the faculty of selection, the faculty of analysis; to search his sensibilities and determine what things truly, through and through, move him; to distinguish between likings genuinely his own and likings he but dallies with as he passes; to establish, in a word, his æsthetic base. Out of all this, at last, will come distinctive experience-rhythms, and when those appear he will begin to demand the imaginative development of them into forms more significant than life itself, forms that react upon life and invest it with new meaning; that reveal to him the grandeur of his own powers when raised to the *nth* degree; that are to the ordinary workaday self as is the vision of the Risen Soul to the tired dealer in earthly things—and such is Art.

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